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Vocal Philologies:

*Written on Skin* and the Troubadours

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Parchment or slate were precious materials to the medieval scholar – or composer – and they were used repeatedly for successive sketching. Today, many centuries later, surviving manuscripts appear chaotic, with a surface complexity almost resembling organic growth, although their straight lines reveal they are man-made. In deciphering these mysterious objects one can unravel the sequence of layers and trace back to the initial text.

—George Benjamin, programme note to *Palimpsests for Orchestra* (1998-2002)<sup>1</sup>

Protector:     What is it that you are looking at?

Boy:            Nothing, says the Boy,  
                    thumbing the knife.

Protector:     Thinking about?

Boy:            I'm thinking that when this wood and this light  
                    are cut through by eight lanes of poured concrete,  
                    I'm thinking that the two of us  
                    and everyone we love  
                    will have been dead for a thousand years.

Protector:     The future's easy: tell me about now.

—George Benjamin, *Written on Skin*, text for music by Martin Crimp (Part II, scene ix)<sup>2</sup>

Parchment is an unexpected vocal source to bring to a special issue on the voice in contemporary opera studies. In a field such as medieval studies, my more familiar scholarly habitat, parchment is the common currency of the voice: the ultimate proxy for vocal acts that are long since gone. Voice in the context of parchment is synonymous with the philological activity required to decipher information about song-acts as they were transmitted, reworked, and sometimes corrupted in the medium of ink, notation, and skin. Opera's voices are by contrast promiscuous these days in their commissioning of human and mechanical agents to sustain and transmit an audible presence: in this setting, the parchment medium is obsolete – an arcane reminder of another time, and of other kinds of voices, now surplus to requirement. It is, however, with medieval parchment leaves, and the operatic vocal effects that they provoke, that the present contribution is concerned. It takes up an invitation (irresistible to the medievalist) issued by a recent opera widely regarded as being at the vanguard of the genre, in which parchment has a starring role. That parchment's presence not only prompts exploration of how a seemingly out-of-place vocal technology – and all the attendant philological apparatus that supports its analysis – might illuminate the contemporary operatic voice. It also invites a look back to a much earlier period of vocal production for which parchment is the single most important extant record, and considers what, if anything, a contemporary opera's parchment-voices might have to offer scholars in pursuit of a more elusive vocal past. As moderator in the transhistorical dialogue between contemporary and medieval voices, parchment will be treated in this essay both as a physical entity, to be subjected to philological scrutiny, and as a critical resource, with which to theorize the voice. In both contexts, parchment exposes a paradox at the heart of the vocal medium, medieval and modern. Namely, while parchment seeks to sustain and transmit the sonorous human voice through its translation into systems of melodic notation and text writing, and thus bears witness to the voice's desire to be heard again, it is also emphatically instrumental in its

demise. Melodic and textual transmission of voice-acts in medieval manuscript culture is a story not of fixity, repeatability, and permanence, so much as it is one of variability and instability – words that are commonplace in the lexicon of medieval philology. What aspires to render the voice durable, then, also, always, reveals its precariousness and resistance to permanent record.

The source of the unusual encounter between ancient vocal surface and contemporary voice is George Benjamin's (b. 1960) and Martin Crimp's (b. 1956) opera *Written on Skin*, premiered in Aix-en-Provence in 2012. As its title suggests, skin, in the form of parchment folios that are created and appear throughout the opera, is the engine of the dramatic scenario. Martin Crimp's text is based on a thirteenth-century Occitan prose biography, or *razo*, of the Provençal troubadour Guillem de Cabestaign (?1162-1212), who is attested to in the region of Roussillon in the late twelfth century.<sup>3</sup> Collections of his songs survive in parchment songbooks (*chansonnières*) of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the earliest dating from the mid-thirteenth century, in which biographical texts (*vidas* and *razos*) for him and other troubadours were also collated.<sup>4</sup> Guillem is part of a tradition renowned in the history of song: the songs of the troubadours, who first flourished in the region of Occitania from the first decades of the twelfth century, are the earliest extant tradition of vernacular song in the West; a tradition that was notably concerned with the theme of courtly love, or *fin'amors*. From its beginnings, it was a tradition reliant upon the media of the singing voice and human memory for expression and survival: songs circulated widely through oral transmission in the first century of their creation and beyond. But it eventually become a tradition contingent, too, on parchment for its recording and survival. In both contexts – voice and skin – it was self-conscious of the fallibility of the singing voice as a medium of endurance, transmission, and preservation, even as it consistently claimed its transcendent powers of expression. Parchment ultimately bears witness to the loss of sonorous memory in the troubadour

repertory, with just a fraction of songs surviving with melody; and where songs are notated, they are often partial and variable records, half-stories of song-acts subject to further transformations in notated transmission. Guillem's songs are no exception: as we shall see, they testify to the fragility of the vocal medium, even as they eloquently voice their desire to be heard.

In their search for an operatic subject, Benjamin and Crimp identified Guillem's *razo* as the ideal inspiration, less for its musical associations than for the violent story of Guillem's life and death, as dramatized in his medieval prose biographies and implied in the lyrics of his songs. Spawning a popular myth of the *coeur mangé* in Middle Ages, the story of the knight, Guillem, his love affair with of a noble lady, Lady Soremonda, and the retribution of her duped husband, Raimon de Castel Roussillon, in which Raimon cuts out, seasons, cooks, and serves up the troubadour/knight's heart to his wife, has the drama and vivid characterizations to lend itself to an operatic treatment.<sup>5</sup> Set in the medieval context of the troubadour's world, the key characters of the original love-triangle remain, their historical specificity downplayed, with husband and wife transformed into the characters of the Protector (bass-baritone) and Woman, Agnès (soprano). The troubadour appears as a Boy (counter-tenor), but his identity is transformed from song-maker into an itinerant manuscript illuminator – a transformation to which I shall return presently. It is the illuminated folios he produces – visible on stage throughout – that provide the structure and dramatic form of the opera.

Parchment's appearance in *Written on Skin* is in one sense a natural by-product of the historical context of Crimp's and Benjamin's source text, and of that crucial transformation of the singing troubadour, Guillem de Cabestaing, into a manuscript illuminator. Yet its significance and meaning in the opera is far from stable: its historical status, and its status as a vocal or visual source, are constantly in flux. Parchment is simultaneously a prompt

recalling the medium of the extant literary and musical sources of the medieval troubadour on which Crimp and Benjamin drew for their work, and a newly-created surrogate – a prop meticulously researched and presented within a medieval past re-rendered in the contemporary operatic context. And despite the seeming de-voicing of the troubadour in his translation into illuminator, the folios he produces in the opera consistently require contemporary voicing to be made visible to characters and audience. More importantly, his final creation of a “secret page,” in which his affair with Agnès is revealed, is not illuminated at all, but comprises of words written on skin, and furthermore requires performance aloud by the Protector. Slippage here, between parchment’s status as a visual and a vocal source thus aligns the Boy’s work, too, with the culture of the medieval *chansonniers* through which troubadour lyrics were inscribed and preserved. The status of this crucial folio – as a record and prompt for vocal acts – will be the subject of the second part of this essay.

Parchment’s changeable status in the opera is in part consequence of the broader temporal complexities of the work – an aspect that has drawn repeated attention since its premiere. In the context of a medieval past recreated in and as the here-and-now, the regimes of past and present in the opera, and of historical time itself, are mobile concepts. In interview, the writer and composer explain their engagement with the medieval setting not as one of representation, but of re-rendering the past: for Benjamin “the world that the five characters of *Written on Skin* inhabit is not genuinely medieval, it’s more the world of today looking back and bringing an old world back to life,” while for Crimp, the goal was to “retain the specific aspects of the period... [that] did not mean trying at all costs to transpose the story into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but leaving it in the 13<sup>th</sup> century of its origins, and placing it within a contemporary framework. The way I’d describe *Written on Skin* is as a hot story within a cool frame.”<sup>6</sup> The intricate workings of that hot/cool temporal scheme, and their implications for historicism, have also spurred early critical responses, and notably an insightful study by

Maria Ryan on conceptions of history and historiography in the opera; time in *Written on Skin* is also addressed in the work of theatre historian Elisabeth Angel-Perez's on Crimp's plays and opera texts.<sup>7</sup> As their accounts elaborate, the mixed temporalities – or temporal simultaneities – are signalled in numerous ways. For example, the cast of medieval characters speak simultaneously from in the “now” of the thirteenth-century environment they inhabit, but also from the present-time perspective, through acts of self-narration (the constant interjection of “he says/ she says” into the lines they utter). Meanwhile, the core “medieval” cast is supplemented by angel witnesses, who observe and comment from the present-time perspective, explaining the events of the past as bound into the present catastrophes (their resonance with Walter Benjamin's Angel of History is identified by Crimp as a point of reference).<sup>8</sup> Characters within and without the medieval story are also self-aware of the multiple temporalities they inhabit: as quoted at this essay's opening, the Boy speculates about a bleak future in which eight-lane concrete highways overlay the woods and trees of his real-time habitat.

Within the complex temporalities of *Written on Skin*, parchment thus inhabits a strange position as both a centuries-old ancient source, and as a created act, in the present-time of the opera's medieval world, whose ink and paint are barely dry. Yet these are ambiguities that the opera's makers take pains to draw attention to: parchment's changing face – as operatic prop/artefact, medieval source, and object of philological investigation – is a powerful subplot unfolding before the eyes and ears. Before proceeding further, a brief orientation to parchment's place within the opera will therefore be instructive. Figure 1 is a screen shot from the 2013 DVD of Katie Mitchell's original 2012 production, which she developed in close collaboration with composer and text writer.<sup>9</sup>

[INSERT FIGURE 1 AROUND HERE]

It shows the stage just prior to the start of Part I, scene vi – the opera’s dual temporalities instantly visible. Mitchell’s split stage shows the historical “now” of the medieval characters (the “hot” story) to the right, adjacent to the present time of the opera’s making (the “cool” frame). These time-frames are experienced simultaneously, since the viewer has constant visual access to both spheres throughout. In this scene, the Woman, Agnès, is alone at night. She inhabits the main lower register, which is here a room in a house shared with the Protector. She is wakeful, thinking of her desire for the Boy, aroused a few nights earlier on a visit to his writing-room (in Part I, scene iv). There, she viewed his manuscript illuminations, and commissioned him to create an illuminated parchment folio for her, to portray her in intimate, erotic detail. The Boy will shortly appear, folio in hand, for them to pour over together, their voices entwined to the accompaniment of a vivid, coloristic orchestral support, and permitting the audience to “see in” to what they see on the folio (see Figure 2). It is this act of voicing parchment, and the physical intimacy it initiates, that will prove critical, and ultimately fatal, for the course of their story in the opera.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 AROUND HERE]

But before then, and the beginning their love-song (or leaf-song), the production shows that soon-to-be source of their desire in a process of uncanny reverse transmission, from present to past, from “cool” to “hot” spheres. As Agnès restlessly paces back and forth, the Boy is seen clad in his medieval garb moving from the top floor of the left-hand register to the bottom, via a linking staircase. These rooms are another world altogether: a modern conservation suite, where throughout the opera people attired in sharp black suits and lab coats work busily and silently on the restoration of medieval manuscripts, in visual counterpoint to the action of the medieval past adjacent; it doubles as a prop room, too, and



characters from the “hot” story don medieval costume before “going back” into the medieval scenario. Now, in the out-of-hours gloom of the lab, the Boy picks up a folio with conservator’s delicacy, from the book cradle on which it rests, and makes his way down a staircase to another conservation area, with nothing but a door separating him from the medieval room in which Agnès awaits (Figure 3).

[INSERT FIGURE 3 AROUND HERE]

As she self-narrates her setting, she asks “what can she hear inside of her?” to which she replies “Her own voice. What does the voice want? To wind and to wind itself around another.” The Boy, meanwhile, finishes his preparations, gently placing his folio into a leather book bag: the bag itself, like the folio, is chosen with erudite, curatorial precision by set designer Vicki Mortimer, to equip the Boy for the thirteenth-century timeframe into which he is imminently to depart. Agnès hears him at the door – the connective on stage between past and present – and asks who is there, and what his purpose is:

Boy:           Him. The Boy.

Agnès:       What d’you want, says the woman.

Boy:           To show you the page, says the Boy.

And then he enters – back from the future – bringing the folio into the medieval “now” of the opera, and to the moment of its first performance/sighting, in the hands of Agnès (**figure four**).

\*

Few recent operas have drawn so unanimously a positive critical reception as *Written on Skin*. From the earliest reviews following its premiere at the Festival d’Aix-en-Provence in 2012 to its recent 2017 revival at London’s Royal Opera House, the opera has elicited

hyperbolic praise as a work of “genius fully formed” and confident predictions of its future eminence in the canon.<sup>10</sup> The reasons for this wide-spread appreciation are no doubt complex and will require historical distance to contextualize. However, a recurring theme in press reviews is the attribution of the opera’s success in no small part to its score, and notably to an appreciation for a musical language which sounds so distinctly different from much other contemporary opera: one early review thus describes it bluntly as having a “beauty rare in contemporary music.”<sup>11</sup> Another compelling reason for the opera’s success, though, may be the opera’s recourse to historical sources, and the intensity of the human drama they inspire. In one of the first substantial critiques to situate *Written on Skin* within a comprehensive history of the genre, and reflection on the future of the genre, Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker pinpoint what they term the “revenant” quality of the opera – evident both in its musical language, which seems to turn away from contemporary trends towards older models; and also, of course, its subject matter. Situating their critique within an assessment of broader trends in twenty-first-century opera composition and opera-going, Abbate and Parker point out that *Written on Skin* is in fact not alone in its turn to historically remote tales for dramatic inspiration in twenty-first-century opera productions (they cite examples such as Thomas Adès’s *The Tempest* and Kaija Saariaho’s *L’Amour de loin* as complementary cases), a move that taps into the appetite among audiences and composers of contemporary opera for works infused with the “ambience” of distant narratives.<sup>12</sup> The allure of the “timelessness” of such tales may be a means to side-step more timely operatic topics, coupled in *Written on Skin* with the musical-stylistic choices of Benjamin’s score, which set it apart so distinctively from the style of much other contemporary opera. “Why twelfth-century troubadours and artists (*L’Amour*, *Written on Skin*)? Why Mediterranean sea travel (*Tempest*, *L’Amour*)?,” they ask, suggesting that “perhaps timelessness is alluring because there remains some pervasive uneasiness about opera’s fragile position in contemporary culture.”<sup>13</sup> That

Benjamin and Crimp's newly announced opera, *Lessons in Love and Violence*, is again grounded in distant historical sources (this time, Elizabethan sources) sustains that hypothesis: of an operatic future in which the timeless appeal of the past is a prominent inspiration.<sup>14</sup>

While the medieval content of *Written on Skin* may thus contribute to its claim for a place in operatic history, and in shaping future trajectories for the genre, its treatment of the medieval past also chimes with current priorities within medieval studies. Opera's historic fascination with old stories has long ensured it a productive presence in reception histories in fields such as Classics as well as medieval studies.<sup>15</sup> The historical complexities of an opera such as *Written on Skin* are resonant, too, with more recent trends in medievalism/neo-medieval studies and particularly in the recently inaugurated field of postmedieval studies.<sup>16</sup> *Written on Skin* not surprisingly lends itself to contextualization within contemporary acts of neomedievalism across a variety of sonic media, an aspect of the opera that will be taken up in a forthcoming study by Anne Stone<sup>17</sup> But the opera's play on history and historicism also intersects with an emerging critical strand of medievalism and postmedieval studies devoted to matters of the temporalities of medieval and neomedieval artefacts, and with the productive potential of what Carolyn Dinshaw, a guiding light in the field of postmedievalism, has termed the "asynchronous" or "out of synch" relationships between them.<sup>18</sup> In her introduction to the 2016 *Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*, Louise D'Arcens likewise emphasizes the fluid boundaries that separate the medieval past that is "discovered" (what she terms "the remains of the past in the post-medieval period and their study"), and that which is "made" (namely, "post-medieval acts of making the past"), and the possibilities, and inevitability, of approaches forged at the intersection of the historical medieval and neomedieval.<sup>19</sup> There are, moreover, ample inspirations for this new modality of medieval studies, in which studies of the medieval past "discovered" and "made" are

juxtaposed, and integrated, notably in the ground-breaking work of Carol Dinshaw and Stephanie Trigg, and especially as espoused in contributions and special editions of the journal *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies*.<sup>20</sup> Together, these approaches encourage further loosening of temporal distinctions in scholarly approaches to the medieval past, and a further drawing together of medieval and postmedieval sources.

A final model for situating the multiple temporalities of *Written on Skin* presents itself, and that is in George Benjamin's own recurring recourse to the medieval past (and parchment in particular), not only for subject matter and lyric resource of his compositions (as in *Written on Skin*, but also in his 2014-15 *Dream of the Song*, which includes settings of verses by Samuel NaNagid and Solomon Ibn Gabirol, eleventh-century Hebrew poets), but also as a conceptual inspiration for his compositional process.<sup>21</sup> His orchestral work *Palimpsests for Orchestra* (1998-2002) is most explicit in its use of the medieval as creative model for a process concerned with stylistic layering. As the title suggests, and as is outlined by Benjamin's accompanying notes to the score (see the first epigraph to this essay), the successive layers of writing on the manuscript surface – the palimpsest – serve as a vitalizing metaphor for a musical process in which distinct stylistic effects co-exist, and sometimes clash and collide. The layered composition, as Benjamin characterizes it, is thus akin to the palimpsest manuscript, and its two movements “explore the play of perspectives as multiple musics superimpose and interlock.”<sup>22</sup> While in this context the parchment functions as a means to elucidate a musical process that is without explicit sonic inspiration from the Middle Ages, Benjamin's remarks on the palimpsest nonetheless offer a provocative metaphor, in turn, for engaging with the medieval pasts presented in *Written on Skin*.<sup>23</sup>

Guided by these recent critical perspectives on *Written on Skin*'s engagement with the medieval past, by the experimental approaches modelled in postmedieval critiques that bring into dialogue medieval and postmedieval texts, and by Benjamin's own fruitful use of the

palimpsest as metaphor, the rest of my contribution returns to that vital site of parchment within the opera, and pursues the unavoidable ties (past and present) of parchment in the opera to vocal acts. It considers what it would mean to take parchment on the dual terms presented in the opera – as simultaneously “found” (a medieval artefact subject to the forensic scrutiny of the conservation lab) and as “made” (in the medieval “now” of the hot story, and in the entirety of the work). It also considers what is often lost or corrupted in the parchment medium: the voice of the troubadour (erased from the operatic scenario, and also absent from the notated historical record), and the voice that is eventually erased within the opera by virtue of a revelation written on parchment – that of Agnès, who leaps to her death at the end of the story when her infidelity is publicized. What follows, then, is an experiment that pursues parchment from both the medieval and postmedieval perspectives, and explores the unexpected moments where their texts seem to “superimpose and interlock” (to borrow from Benjamin). The method of approach turns inevitably to practices of historical philology. While these are practices developed for the study of historical texts and sources, they are also tantalizingly performed within the cool frame of the conservation suites of *Written on Skin* itself, and thus lend themselves to study of the opera extremely well. Following an overview of the presence of the medieval troubadour in the opera, the essay will trace two lines of transmission of voice through parchment. The first, an example of a medieval voice that is “discovered,” treats the operatic sources as an extension of the complex transmission history of the troubadour, Guillem de Cabestaign, and illuminates points of overlap between the medieval and operatic manuscript sources. The second, an example of medieval voices that are “made,” pursues the folios represented within the opera – those made by the Boy before the audience’s eyes and ears – as themselves constituting a line of transmission, within the internal time-frame of the opera. These parallel philologies reveal an extraordinary point of convergence in the form of the “secret page” made by the Boy and performed by the

Protector in Part III, scene xii: the contents and form of this folio will be subject to special scrutiny in both philological analyses. In juxtaposing these two philologies, I do not seek to position the medieval text as explanatory or ancillary to the work of Benjamin and Crimp, or vice versa. Rather, following Benjamin's lead, I seek to expose points of contact: points which are unpredictable, unplanned, and yet which through their strange asynchrony, permit voices (past and present) a robustness and durability that, by the very nature of their medium, are otherwise precarious.

Illuminator as Troubadour: Traces of Guillem de Cabestaign in *Written on Skin*

Operas about singers abound in the tradition. From Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* (1607) to a recently premiered work such as Thomas Adès's *The Exterminating Angel* (2016), whose dinner guests include an opera singer, opera's conceit of casting singers to perform the role of singers has inspired many and varied treatments in the genre. Among opera's roll-call of mythic bards, divas and serenading counts, medieval song-makers (troubadours, jongleurs, and Meistersingers) have often been called on for guest appearances. Benjamin's and Crimp's turn to the figure of a troubadour for their new work thus has ample precedent. It makes all the more conspicuous the lyric absentee in their re-rendering of the medieval sources. Guillem de Cabestaign is transformed from the high-ranking knight and song-maker of the medieval sources, into a classless, nameless Boy, his historical specificity and those of his lover and patron erased; and in the move from troubadour to illuminator he is also rendered songless.

In interview, both Crimp and Benjamin account for their attraction to the medieval source not for its musical possibilities, but rather for the dramatic potential and timeless, everyman quality of the *razo*. As in their earlier operatic collaboration, *Into the Little Hill*

(2006), a re-telling of the story of the Pied Piper, they sought to craft “ancient stories from the modern vantage point.” Part of the *razo*’s appeal, then, was that it tells a universal tale of love and betrayal, but at a historical remove.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, the extreme and violent nature of the *coeur mangé* tale was another draw, paradoxically, though, because it lends itself to the heightened effect of singing: according to Crimp, “in a piece of musical theatre, the story represented always has to have something extraordinary, something excessive about it, to make it appropriate for singing. It seemed to me that the subject of the ‘eaten heart’ really did call for singing.”<sup>25</sup>

Musical concerns also motivate the substitution of the illuminator for the troubadour: the exchange distances the audible, vocal world of the opera from that of its medieval sources. Crimp explains that “in an opera, everything is sung, so I didn’t want one of our characters to be a singer by profession, because that would have been redundant. Nor did I want to introduce any troubadour music into the work.”<sup>26</sup> Benjamin is also explicit that “there is absolutely no form of pastiche or any quotation in the score,” albeit with the intriguing caveat that there is occasionally “a hint of something archaic in the use of certain intervals between the voices, and in the harmonic chemistry.”<sup>27</sup> In eschewing the lyrical and stylistic possibilities of its medieval model, *Written on Skin* bears interesting comparison to another troubadour-inspired opera from the twenty-first-century repertory: Kaija Saariaho’s *L’Amour de loin* (2000), whose libretto by Amin Maalouf is based on the *vida* and *cansos* of the first-generation troubadour, Jaufré Rudel (fl. 1130-1147/8). In their recent account of the opera, Abbate and Parker locate it within the long-standing operatic tradition of “songs-within-song,” noting that the hyper-musical nature of interpolated songs and soundscapes in the opera function as a “brief aesthetic vacation.”<sup>28</sup> Song-acts in *L’Amour de loin* are marked out by a shift of musical writing – notably, to triple meter and clearly defined and balanced vocal phrases, evoking the familiar contours of strophic and repetitive forms associated with

songs.<sup>29</sup> Contributing to the effect, the original Occitan lyrics of two of Jaufre's *cansos*, and French translations of them, form the textual basis of the song-acts within the opera's narrative.<sup>30</sup> Though void of direct melodic citation of Jaufre's songs, the combination of the citation of Occitan lyrics and the shift in style of melodic writing mark key passages out as song simulations, and they are cued as performances, or reports of performances, within the narrative. These examples of "songs-within-song" are a useful point of comparison when exploring Crimp's and Benjamin's design, in which erasure of the troubadour seems to void opportunities for explicit representation of medieval song-acts.

However, if obvious audible references to the Boy's musical ancestry are absent from Benjamin's score, elements of the troubadour's craft and voice nonetheless retain a shadowy presence in the opera. And the primary agent of that lyric dimension is the opera's accumulation of parchment folios. In spite of song's absence as cited event, parchment production is regulated by the poetics of vocal production as defined by the troubadour corpus. It is the product of a commission by a patron (the Protector); it is inspired by an object of desire (the Woman); and above all, its manufacture in the opera is the product of the poetics governing medieval song-production – namely, the poetics of "trobar." The older, originary agendas of lyric and vocal production that permeates the original *razo* and texts of Guillem's songs maintains a presence, conjoined now to the Boy's graphic creations.

Although an illuminator, whose currency is parchment and paint, not voice, the conditions of the Boy's labour mirrors that of the troubadour. Notably, Crimp retains vocabulary of "invention" to characterize the Boy's work, and others' reactions to it. For example, when Agnès first appears in the Boy's writing-room (Part I, scene iv), she asks to see his book, and asks questions about the subject of the illuminations – scenes of Creation, no less. The Boy responds with the emphatic claim that they are the work of his "invention":

Boy: What d'you want, says the Boy.



Agnès: To see, says the woman.

Boy: See what?

Agnès: To see – to see how a book is made.

What is that tree?

Boy: The Tree, says the Boy, of Life.

Agnès: Ah. Odd.

Boy: I invented it.

Agnès: Ah. Yes. And who is this woman?

Boy: Eve, says the Boy.

Agnès: Ah.

Boy: Yes.

Agnès: Invented too?

Boy: Yes, says the Boy, invented too.

The etymology of invention here has precise links to the fundamentals of the troubadour's art: one of "trobar," in which "making" and "discovery" are synonymous in the creative act of song-making. That connection to "trobar" is made through Crimp's English rendering of the Occitan texts as "invention," which derives from the Latin root "invenire," which means to find or discover. That dual sense of making and finding innate in the medieval etymology bears striking a coincidence with the contemporary medievalist categories of the past that is "made" and the past that is "discovered," discussed above. However, it is a coincidence that exposes a fundamental difference between medieval and contemporary conception of creative process and authority. In the medieval context, collapse of "then" and "now" categories embodied in the meaning of "trobar" and "invenire" connects to a deep-rooted conception of composition as consultation of the internal archive of the memory. In scholastic culture, "invention" is understood as a first step in the process of

composition, and as a “mental process of searching one’s inventory.” Authority, in turn, is attributed to texts which are summoned in the invention of new compositions.<sup>31</sup> The Boy’s self-representation as inventor shadows the characterization and self-characterization of troubadour activity as “trobar,” and of their songs as “trobair” – literally as things found. That precise formula appears in all versions of the *vida* and *razo* for Guillem (as it does for countless other troubadours in the tradition). (See “Notes from the Stage” in this issue for extracts and translations.) Thus, for example, a short version of the *razo* begins with a classic characterization of Guillem as “uns gentils castelans del comtat de Rossillon ... valens fo e cortes e mout enseignatz et bons cavaliers d’armas, e mout presiatz per totas las bonas gens, e mout amatz per las dompnas. E fo bons trobair” (“...a noble lord of a manor from the county of Roussillon ... he was noble, courtly, learned, a fine knight at arms, highly esteemed b all the good people and greatly loved by the ladies. He also made good songs.”) A longer version characterizes his song-making as “invention” as well as performance: “De [s]i enan fo del[s] servenz d’Amor et comencet de trobar cobletas avinenz e gaias, e danzas e cansos d’avinent cantar” (“From then on he was the servant of Love and began to invent gay and gracious verses, dances, and love songs that are lovely to sing.”) “Invention” in *Written on Skin*, understood in the antique, Latinate sense, thus exposes the Boy’s kinship with the troubadour, and in turn invites contemplation of his activity as akin to that of the voice. It in turn invites contemplation of the parchment as a visual, but also as a vocal act: as something akin to “songs-within-song” after all.

If the terms of parchment’s manufacture interact with those of troubadour *canso*, the folios also retain an impression of a sonic environment, left in the space of the songs they displace, by virtue of their contemporary makers’ innately musical responses to the skin’s surface. The commission, production, and viewing of parchment is an important structuring device in the opera, with the three main Miniatures (presentations of illuminated leaves)

supplemented with the appearance of additional sheets, interleaved throughout the opera's three parts. (See the Appendix to this essay for a summary and brief description of parchment's appearance in the opera.) While parchment thus lends dramatic structure to the opera, it also shapes the text and score in crucial ways. Moreover, despite his impulse to diminish any overt musical references of the original medieval source material, Crimp explains his fascination with the graphic beauty of medieval manuscripts, and the relationship between words and images, as analogous to song: while the parchment leaves on the one hand are a means to explore language and its interaction with images, in the context of the operatic medium "they take the place of what might have been sung by the troubadour."<sup>32</sup>

Musically, too, the folios are subject to special treatment, not as explicit song interpolations such as occur in a work such as *L'Amour de loin*, but rather as a shift to an orchestral and vocal soundworld that is distinct from the rest of the score. Particularly striking is Benjamin's reserve of unusual instruments for use exclusively in scenes with parchment, revolving around the uncanny sonorities of glass harmonica, mandolins, and plaintive lines of a double-stopping bass viola da gamba. Their setting, frequently foregrounded within a pared-down orchestra, makes them instantly audible, and as the sonority accumulates familiarity in the opera, it comes to cue a particular modality of listening, connected to looking at parchment. (See Appendix for full details.) The opening of Part I scene vi, for example (discussed above), where Agnès is alone, prior to the arrival of the Boy and her folio, begins with a quiet string accompaniment to the lone bass viola da gamba, elaborating quiet improvisatory gestures beneath Agnès's vocal ruminations: an ethereal transition into the realm of intimate parchment-viewing that then ensues. Commentators have noted that the instruments themselves carry antique associations (the glass harmonica's "revelance" effects, linked not only to its uncanny associations with ghosts, but also to its older usages in operas such as Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*).<sup>33</sup>

While these sonorities may represent the “archaic” tinges that Benjamin acknowledges as part of the sonority of his score, their purpose is not to evoke a historical context, nor to introduce something “old” into the texture. Rather, Benjamin seems to use the unusual sonorities to create a musical timeout in the score – an unusual sonority that stands out for special attention with each appearance. These moments serve as the aural means to transpose the listener into a distinct heightened, more intensively musical realm, since the instrumentation and vocal writing that it provokes are frequently more lyrical, melodious and harmonically consonant than the more regular musical language of the opera. These moments are also an equivalence to song, if not a “song-within-song” in the technical sense in which a composer such as Saariaho marks out song-acts with special musical effects. Rather, the score’s exquisite musical reflexes in the presence of parchment stand in the place where medieval songs once stood: they seem to bring the opera full-circle, back to the originary site of song in its sources, and to the vocal utterances of the troubadour. (The mysterious musical effects of parchment also extend to vocal writing in these scenes – a point to which I return later in the essay.)

While parchment’s interaction with medieval lyric poetics, and its special treatment in Benjamin’s score thus mark it out as musically expressive, there is one scene where the voice of Guillem de Cabestaing surfaces into the foreground of the opera in the form of an explicit quotation: the point at which the “discovered” historical texts of the troubadour collide with those “made” in Crimp’s rendering. It occurs in Part III, scenes xi-xii, in which the Boy presents the Protector with his promised commission; and with it, a “secret page,” handwritten rather than illuminated, whose text reveals the Boy’s sexual relationship with Agnès. Illegible to the illiterate Agnès, the folio is her longed-for publication of their love, prepared to *her* commission in Part I, scene x, and one which here requires reading aloud to reveal its message. As the Protector ventriloquizes the Boy, via the parchment source, the ancient text

of Guillem is heard, in Crimp's English rendering of the opening strophe of the troubadour's  
*canso Aissi cum selh que baissa.l fuehl (PC 213:1):*

Protector:

mouth

– see it –

mouth

– writes the Boy –

heart hair mouth nail hand skin blood – her neck

– writes the Boy –

of amethyst, her long white back,

even the gold-flecked iris of her eye:

each part

each part

each part of her body

– writes the Boy –

she has offered and has used for her own pleasure.

---

Like the man

– writes the Boy –

like the man who bends down the branch

in summer

to cut the most high-up flower

– writes – writes the Boy –

I have reached up for her love  
And have bent her willingly to the ground.  
(Crimp, *Written on Skin*, Part III, scene XII)

**“Aissi cum selh que baissa.l fuelh”**

Aissi cum selh que baissa.l fuelh  
E pren de las flors la gensor,  
Ai eu chاوزit en un aut bruelh  
Sobre totas la belhazor,  
Quelh eys Dieus, sense fallida,  
La fetz de sa eyssa beutat  
E mandet qu’ab humilitat  
Fos sa grans valors grazida.

As the man who bends the branch,  
and plucks the most precious of flowers,  
I have chosen, on the highest branch,  
the most beautiful flower of all.  
God himself, it is certain,  
created her in own beauty,  
and commanded that with humility  
she be exalted for her great value.

Crimp identifies the passage as one of three fleeting quotations in the opera, “lifted, like a magpie, from other literary ‘nests’” (the other two are drawn from the Song of Songs

and a tenth-century Arabic encyclopaedia, the *Secret Book of Secrets*, translated into Latin in the twelfth century as the *Secretum Secretorum*).<sup>34</sup> These he understands not as anachronisms, but rather as “‘reminders’ of the place where we really are... here and now.”<sup>35</sup> Its presence in English translation, rather than in the original Occitan, further blurs any disjunction between the contemporary and medieval literary registers, to maintain that sense of the medieval “now” of the opera. Musically speaking, the citation of Guillem’s song in *Written on Skin* carries no audible trace of its medieval origins, and Benjamin deploys none of the markers used elsewhere in the opera (bass viola da gamba, glass harmonica, mandolin) to mark out the language of either vocal line or orchestral surround.<sup>36</sup> Melodically, though, the voice changes here (bars 137-157): into long, languid lines straining into the highest register of the voice, and rendered through the transparent timbral effects of fleeting use of falsetto at a pianissimo dynamic – a contrast to the hoarse, whispered effects and choppy assertions which precede it (bars 114-136), the more familiar vocality of the Protector (see Example 1).

[INSERT EXAMPLE 1 AROUND HERE]

These vocal adjustments contribute to an impression that he sings with a voice that is not his own – though exactly whose voice this is remains uncertain. If signals of the song as an interpolated artefact are minimized here, then, the passage nonetheless invites closer attention for what it may reveal about parchment’s role in the transmission and scripting of voices both from within the opera (the Protector sings lines scripted by the Boy), and beyond (the Boy’s text in turn rehearses lines from the troubadour’s *canso*). While there are no audible traces here of the medieval vocal environment of Guillem’s *canso*, there are ways in which this

scene, and the events that have led up to the sheet's creation, are entwined with the activity of song-making, or "trobar," in the practice of troubadour song.

The remaining two sections of the essay will subject the Boy's "secret page" to two lines of philological inquiry, in which the lyrics inscribed on it will be understood as both historical source – a trace of medieval past "discovered" – and as an artefact produced within the medieval past created within the opera's rationale – as a medieval past "made." The first exercise (of the past "discovered") follows the lead of back to the medieval sources for Guillem's songs, as instigated by the citation of *Aissi cum selh que bassa.l fuelh* in Part III, scene xii. The second (of the past "made") will examine the "secret page" as the product of creative processes of making and transmission within the opera itself, demonstrating how the parchment folio is the culmination of a longer process of vocal creation and transmission within the opera itself. These two readings are juxtaposed, rather than integrated, and are to be understood not as causal (the medieval source "explaining" the contemporary work, or vice versa). Instead, they are to be understood in a palimpsestic relationship: revealing points of unexpected intersection and overlap. What these processes share is a concern above all with the connections between the act of song-making, or invention or "trobar" of song, and the desire and anxiety surrounding the preservation of the voices required to sustain that act – to maintain vocal presence.

#### Vocal Philology 1: The Troubadour's Song

As the Protector makes his way through the words on the Boy's "secret page," he summons one of the oldest and most revered extant traditions of vernacular love song into the "hot" medieval narrative of *Written on Skin*. The first philological exploration of Guillem's presence on the "secret page" situates the folio within the broader context of the troubadour's songs and their sources. The purpose of the exercise is to draw attention to recurring themes in Guillem's songs – centrally, the compelling connections between acts of desire, violent



loss, and the singing voice – to illuminate more clearly the hermeneutic implications of the citation on the Boy’s “secret page.”

There is perhaps no more fitting entry into the lyric landscape of the troubadours than the summery bowers which open Guillem’s *canso*. The flowery opening furnishes the *canso* with an exordium that is a cliché for that tradition, one notoriously formulaic and reiterative in its poetics of *fin’amors* and *trobar*.<sup>37</sup> To begin, a closer look at *Aissi cum selh qui baissa. I fuelh* will offer a brief orientation to the conditions of song-making, and of the singing voice, in the works of Guillem and his cohort. (See “Notes from the Stage” for texts and translations.) *Aissi cum selh que baissa. l fuelh* is one of nine extant songs attributed to Guillem de Cabestaing, and is transmitted throughout the main corpus of *chansonnières* of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries dedicated to Occitan song.<sup>38</sup> In its thematic and formal content, and in its transmission patterns, it is typical of other *cansos* in Guillem’s corpus, and of the wider lyric tradition. I will return to matters of transmission presently, and for now focus on the song’s thematic aspect. Formed of six eight-line stanzas, organized in the form of *coblas unissonans*, the first-person protagonist, or *chantador*, relates a familiar lyric situation – the inexorable progression from loving to singing/*trobar*. Following the opening metaphor of the lady-as-flower in stanza one (quoted in *Written on Skin*), the singer sets out the physical qualities of the lady’s unimpeachable beauty as inspiration to song (stanza two). The connection set out between love – and all its associated pains – and the act of singing represents the classic and enduring creative dynamic of the tradition. Here, the phrase “mas era.m fai chanter” (“now I am made to sing;” II: 14), captures the imperative that underpins the lyric impulse, and that supplies the song’s *raison-d’être*: to love is to sing. Love, in the lyric context, is characterized as a violent oscillation between joy and bitter, often catastrophic sorrow, “Amor et Cossirier” (“Love and Sorrow;” IV:30); meanwhile, love’s provocation, the lady, is typical of other lyric ladies: lofty and remote, her unattainability the

source of considerable suffering for her petitioner, the voice of the song. Finally, the Lady's presentation follows another familiar pattern of the tradition, as she is objectified throughout the song: as a "aut caphuelh" ("high prison;" V: 33), and her physical attributes itemized as "dous esguart ... cortes huelh" ("sweet look ... elegant eyes;" II: 9).

In addition to *Aissi cum selh que baixa.l fuelh*, a second song attributed to Guillem has an implied presence within the opera, by virtue of its citation in the two versions of the *razo* on which Crimp's text is based. In the first instance, its lyrics serve as useful amplification of the lyric curriculum set out in *Aissi cum selh. Lo dous cossire* (PC 213, 5; see "Notes from the Stage" for text and translation) resides in the same landscape of *fin'amors* as *Aissi cum selh*, and offers further illustration of the crucial conjunction of love, loss, and song. It comprises six fifteen-line strophes, plus two shorter *tornada* (shorter concluding stanzas, directed at the addressee of the song), organized on the scheme of *coblas doblas* (in which the rhyme scheme changes every two strophes). Like *Aissi cum selh baixa.l fuelh*, its singer's preoccupation is with the pain of desire for the lady, about whom the mere thought ("lo dous cossire") is enough to provoke his song. It opens by foregrounding the intersection of song-making/*trobar* with love of a lady, but this time as an active, real-time act of performance – as something made to be recited: "Lo dous cossire... dona.m fair dire/de vos maynh ver plazen" ("Sweet thought... makes me recite about you Lady many pleasing verses," I: 1-4). The lady is again objectified, and her body inventoried, but this time in the memory of the singer, who is once again traumatically at a remove from his love: "pessan remire/vostre cors car e gen ... En sovinensa/tenc la car'e.l dous ris/vostra valensa/e'l belh cors blanc et lis" ("Pensive, I gaze on your noble, precious body ... In my memory/I hope on to your face and sweet laugh/ your worth, and beautiful, smooth, white body;" I: 5-6 and III: 31-34). Memory's image of her proves insufficient, and spiralling through tears and sighs, the song concludes with a plea for mercy "ans que s'ensenda/sobre.l cor la dolors" ("before

agony takes flame in my heart;” V: 61-62), and asks her to suspend separation and grant him joy.

The exposition of Guillem’s *cansos* serves to foreground the vital connection between singing and love – between medium and message – and also the dire pains of separation that are synonymous with loving. *Lo dous cossire*’s summons of memory further draws attention to the most enduring, and literal, concern of this repertory: if love in the logic of troubadour lyric is tantamount to loss, the medium of the singing voice is a fitting conveyer of the message, since it is itself so fragile and fallible a medium. And from the earliest proponents of the tradition, to Guillem’s own inventions, songs are explicit about their fierce desire for the voice and the song to endure. Guillem’s concern for his song’s sonorous afterlife is illustrated, for example, in the *tornada* of *Ay vey qu’em vengut als jorns loncs* (PC 213:3). Here, he lays claim to his song as a thing he desires to remain, to have permanence and endurance. He summons a proxy voice – a *joglar* – to sustain the song, and carry it to his patron:

Joglars, no.t tenha.l cautz estius:  
Vai e Saluda.m mos amius,  
e.N Raimon plus, car el val mais:

Joglar, whom the heat of summer cannot stop,  
go forth, and send my greetings to my friends,  
and N. Raimon most, for he is worth more

Que.l mals m’es douz e savorius  
e.l pauc ben mana don me pais.

Tell them that my suffering is sweet and tasty  
And its scarcities are manna which nourish me.

*Ay vey qu’em vengut als jorns loncs* (PC 213: 3)

Crucially, another manuscript in which the song is transmitted survives with a different ending, the lyrics are reworked to add a clarification: that it is the voice *that sings* that is the keeper of the song:

Joglar, vai e prec te no’t tricx,  
E chanta.l vers a mos amics,  
Et a.N Raimon, cuys fis joys pays.<sup>39</sup>

Joglar, go forth, and I beg you not to delay,  
And sing this verse to my friends,  
And to N. Raimon who is nourished by true joy.

The example of textual variance in the last example returns attention to the ambiguous role of parchment in sustaining the audible voice of the troubadour's song. It evidently participates in the poetics of song's claims and desire for permanence. Yet in this song's transmission from voice to parchment, the material form of the manuscript is implicated in the anxieties of loss that permeate the tradition: the song's variance – its *mouvance* – is further, emphatic proof of the vulnerability of the voice. Indeed, the dual condition of parchment – as keeper and corrupter of the voice – characterizes the wider transmission history of the troubadour lyric, Guillem's included. The detailed transmission history of Guillem's songs is one of characteristic variance – they are never the same twice.<sup>40</sup> Parchment is thus witness to the fragility and fallibility of the troubadour's voice, even as it performs the role to permit its continued presence.

The transmission history of *Aissi cum selh que baissa.l fuelh* and *Lo dous cossire* offers further elaboration of the voice's troubled relationship to the material form. As is typical for the tradition, the songs are widely transmitted in the main corpus of troubadour *chansonniers*, the earliest of which dates from the middle of the thirteenth century (see “Notes from the Stage,” Section 3 for further context on the manuscripts and Section 4 for complete listings of sources with *sigla* for manuscripts cited). These sources are striking not only for their longevity, but also for their witness to a startling absence, one that serves to confirm the internal anxiety of the songs themselves: namely, the loss of melody. As is well known to scholars of the repertory, only a small fraction of melodies are extant in the sources – just 10% of a corpus of over 2000 songs; and of the 40 or so *chansonniers* to transmit the lyrics, just four were prepared with provision for music.<sup>41</sup> In the case of Guillem's corpus, the loss is total, and not a single version of his songs survives with music. The case of manuscript *R* (an early fourteenth-century Provençal manuscript, one of only four to contain notation) reflects that loss: a number of its songs are ruled with staves which, however, remain blank.

On folio 95r (reproduced in “Notes from the Stage,” Section 3), the red staves of *Lo dous cossire* are empty, on a folio entirely void of notation; the melodies here were either lost through a glitch in the copying process or, more likely, through a loss of musical memory in the decades following the song’s creation.

Yet in these sources there is ample evidence, too, of the impulse to preserve the presence of the troubadour, as the incarnate, audible protagonist of the song. As literary historians have explored, the format and luxury nature of the songbooks are part of a large-scale effort at cultural preservation, not of texts abstracted from their makers, but rather as embedded in the social and performative context of their originary environment.<sup>42</sup> Many songbooks are organized by author, with songs appearing adjacent to paratextual signals of authorship: rubricated name (that is, in red ink) and, in some instances, a historiated initial or author portrait depicting the troubadour. For example, in manuscripts *K* folio 89v (reproduced in “Notes from the Stage,” Section 3), *Lo dous cossire* opens the collection of Guillem’s songs, attributed in red rubric to the troubadour, and adjacent to historiated initials depicting him in chivalric pose on horseback. One effect of the *mise-en-page* is thus to intensify the impression of the song’s first-person perspective, highlighted in the opening exordium: that the protagonist of the song is the troubadour himself.

In several *chansonniers*, additional prose texts – *vidas* and *razos* – add biographical detail (see “Notes from the Stage,” Section 2 for further information). Like the songs, these texts were belated, often fabricated stories of the troubadours and the circumstances of their songs’ creation, written down several years after their creation. But like the *chansonniers*, they are likewise energetically engaged in the project of preservation. *Razos* in particular are intended to fix the songs they “rationalize” within the particular context of their creation, and many cite the lyrics fully or partially in their written transmissions. As Bill Burgwinkle notes

in his study of the genre, they were “composed so as to ensure the survival of songs and the cultural practices they document, even as they deform them.”<sup>43</sup>

The two versions of the *razos* associated with Guillem exhibit that will to preserve, offering different accounts for the creation and performance of *Lo dous cossire*. Both situate the song as an uttered and audible act, whose active performance is pivotal in the dramatic demise of the troubadour. A brief exploration of the two uses of *Lo dous cossire* will demonstrate this. (Refer to “Notes from the Stage” for texts and translations.)

In the short *razo* (transmitted in manuscripts *H* and *R*), *Lo dous cossire* is explained as the song the troubadour is driven to create through sorrow: in this case, at the lady’s removal by her husband, Raimon de Castel Roussillon, and imprisonment in a tower under suspicion of her affair. In keeping with the texts of the song, which emphasize pains of separation, Guillem creates his song about a lady who is out of reach:

But Sir Raimon de Castel Roussillon was told that Sir Guillem loved his wife and that she loved him. He became jealous of her and of him and locked her in at the top of a tower. He had her closely guarded and did and said many unpleasant things to her. G. de Capestaing fell into a great sorrow and sadness over this and composed this song which says:

The sweet consternation  
That Love often brings me...

The song, though, is overheard by Sir Raimon, who picks up on the theme of separation: he interprets this as reference to his own jealous concealment of his wife in a tower:

And when R. de Castel Roussillon heard the song that Sir G. had composed, he understood it in such a way that he believed it was composed about his wife for it says in one stanza:

All that I do out of fear  
You must accept in good faith  
Even when I do not see you.

It is this act of listening to the song that provokes his violent retribution, and no sooner has he heard the song than he sets out to cut off Guillem’s head and cut out his heart. In this

scenario, song is a performed act of longing, brought about by separation; and it is also a thing transmitted, audible and provoking reaction, as witnessed by Sir Raimon's devastating actions upon hearing it.

In a longer version of the *razo* (preserved in manuscript *P*), the circumstances of the song's manufacture are radically different. No longer the troubadour's autonomous expression, *Lo dous cossire* is explained as the commission of the Lady Soremonda. Sorrowful and furious that Guillem has duped her, and that he in fact has fallen for her sister (a lie told by Guillem to Raimon to protect his true love), the lady "commanded him to compose a song in which he would show that he loved no other lady but her." The first strophe of *Lo dous cossire* ensues. Once again, the song is overheard by Sir Raimon, and sets in motion the same ghastly dénouement.

The thematics of commission, making, and remaking, of reiteration through voiced performance, and the anxieties about preservation and transmission of song, that emerge in this brief philological exercise stimulate fresh ways to engage with the production of parchment in *Written on Skin* as vocal process. At the same time, this exercise also reveals that in the present-time of the opera's making, the *sound* of Guillem's songs is indeed wholly inaccessible – recall the blank staves of manuscript *R* as witness to their vocal demise. Even if it had been the desire of Benjamin and Crimp to re-sound the musical past, the troubadour, true to the anxiety of the songs, leaves no musical trace. But it was never the ambition of *Written on Skin* to experiment with neomedieval musical styles. What rather endures of the medieval lyric tradition is an overwhelming, even violent desire to let a voice be heard, and for it to continue to sound. And once again, it is parchment that is instrumental – and detrimental – to that desire. The next exercise takes on the production of manuscript folios of *Written on Skin* as if they were sources, in the older, philological sense, and considers their lines of transmission, variance, and their ultimate provenance.

## Vocal Philology 2: Agnès's Song

In the moments preceding the revelation of the “secret page” in Part III, scene xi, the Boy presents the Protector with his completed manuscript commission, as yet unbound. Folios are spread out over a long table, and the Boy explains them, one by one: a grotesque parade of enemies hanging on gibbets, streets running with human fat, fields consumed by fire, his mills, cherry trees, his brother and sister in the shopping mall – all violent and vacuous assertions of the Protector’s power, and emblematic of his Paradise. Like the words inscribed on the “secret page,” which interweave Guillem’s lyrics with those rendered by Crimp, parchment here is the surface on which contemporary and medieval scenes are interleaved, juxtaposed, and interact, oblivious of historical distance separating them. This is a book for all time, and of no time in particular: a book of history, in the sense imagined by Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History. It is in the context of that parchment display that the “secret page” makes its entry: entirely denuded of images, it offers nothing but words, written on skin.

Situated within the fuller formal and material environment of the troubadour song it quotes, as explored above, the folio invites investigation as a song sheet, akin to the unmelodied *chansonnier* sources that witness to Guillem de Cabestaing’s songs, and through which *Aussi cum selh que baissa.l fuelh* otherwise reaches us. Taken on such terms, it activates familiar lines of inquiry: about the songish nature of its content, about its transmission history, and about its provenance. In fact, a preliminary review of the origins of the “secret page” reveals a startling source: tracing the song-sheet’s line of transmission back through the opera unveils its “troubadour” or maker not as the Protector (through whose voice we encounter it), nor is it the Boy who executes it on parchment, and nor, ultimately, is it the historical troubadour, Guillem de Cabestaign, whose lines are cited. Within the thirteenth-century tale as rendered in *Written on Skin*, the originary voice is one that desires



to be heard, made, and preserved: namely, Agnès's. The song sheet is the product of her voiced desires, first uttered in the quiet space of the writing-room in Part I, scene iv, when she commands the Boy as her lyric amanuensis. Before looking more closely at the poetics and design of Agnès's song, it will be helpful to map out the lines of transmission throughout the opera that culminate in the "secret page." (See Table 1).

**[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]**

The origins of Agnès's song lie in the first scene (Part I, scene iv), when she first appears in the Boy's writing-room in the night, her longing to see his illuminated folios interchangeable with her growing desire for him. They look at his work together, with the Boy offering commentary, or *razo*, on what she sees, and asserting his authority as their inventor. Agnès soon draws so close to the folio that she blocks out the light. At that pivotal moment, her proximity to the parchment instigates a new intimacy between the characters, which (as we shall see presently) has immediate vocal consequences. It is at this point of intimacy – between Woman and Boy, gathered around parchment – that Agnès issues her commission: for a work depicting a woman in her own image – "invent the woman you want." Agnès commission is realized in Part I, scene vi, by the presentation of the created folio. Once again, Agnès and the Boy come together in the night, and review the completed work. The Boy first offers commentary on his miniature (the second of the opera's three miniatures). He describes how he has painted a house in winter, set against a starry sky. He has lifted the off its roof, "like a jewel-box lid," to reveal a woman twisted up in white bed-sheets, unable to sleep, depicted as "a living person." He then asks Agnès to describe and evaluate the work to tell him "whether it's real." A second "performance" thus ensues, as Agnès inventories the physical details of the sleepless Woman. The work does not end here,

however, and Agnès returns to the Boy to rework the Woman of her first commission: in Part II, scene x, riven with jealousy by her conviction the Boy has had an affair with her sister, Marie (a lie told to the Protector by the Boy, and then retold by the Protector to Agnès), she commands him to prove his love by showing it to the Protector. The outcome is a creation that pushes Agnès's desire for the Boy "into that man's eye like a hot needle." The culmination of Agnès creation and reworking results in the "secret page" the Protector performs in Part III, scene xii.

The patterns of commission and performance in Crimp's text follow aspects of the setting of *Lo dous cossire* in the medieval *razos*, notably the longer version, in which the lady demands Guillem to make her a song to prove his fidelity and devotion to her. But the intersections do not end here. The very subject matter of Agnès's commission embodies many of the themes familiar in the troubadourian poetics. Agnès's original voicing of her desired work, and its iterations through the three further phases of its transmission, centre around the figure of a desirable and desiring lady – the topos of so many troubadour lyrics. Agnès offers herself as subject for her commission: "a Woman who's real, a woman who can't sleep who keeps turning her white pillow over and over." Moreover, she fashions this woman through a process of careful self-inventory – a portrait made through the assemblage of her physical attributes (eyes, hair, voice, skin). Again, the characterization of the subject as fully embodied, and itemized, echoes the practice of the *canso*, where, as we have seen, the lady is made incarnate and memorable through representation of her fully physical, as well as courtly attributes.

It is not only in the formal aspects of commission and content that the "secret page" intersects with the troubadour's practice. The movement and reiteration of Agnès's commission across the opera also mirrors the passage of voice and transmission through parchment witnessed in the sources of medieval song-culture. This is her song, as the Boy's

“secret page,” voiced by the Protector, confirms: “This is what the woman, what Agnès ... asks me to say to you.” Yet as with the lyrics of Guillem and his cohort, the claims of authorship and for the permanence of Agnès’s creation are fragile, subject to variance and variability even as her commission is sustained through performance and, eventually, inscription onto skin. A comparative analysis of what the Protector sings in Part III, with the preceding scenes of commission, creation, and performance, reveals the persistence of the song’s subject – the embodied Woman – but equally reveals the variants that are a consequence of the song’s *mouvance* across the opera (see Table 2).

**[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]**

In its poetics and transmission, then, Agnès’s commission embodies many facets of the troubadour tradition. But perhaps the most provocative intersection of these acts of “trobar” concerns the activity of the voices that sing Agnès’s song. The lady of Agnès’s song is not just embodied but also, emphatically, envoiced: Agnès’s creative inventory in Part I, scene iv, includes instruction to invent “the precise music of her voice.” And it is through Benjamin’s vocal writing across these scenes that Agnès’s creation assumes its most song-like quality, not through pastiche or any audible emulation of the troubadour monody, but rather, by a design that embodies the most essential, universal principles of song: the creation of musical lines that repeat – that are made to be heard and repeated again, and again. A closer look at the first scenes of commission and performance of Agnès’s song/folio in Part I, scene iv and Part I, scene vi – the lyrical heart of the opera – will illustrate the change of vocal environment that attends her creation.

Agnès’s response to the Boy’s parchment in his workshop in Part I, scene iv is what stirs her desire, and the desire for her own song-folio. The vocal writing takes on a form of

musical intimacy through proximity to parchment, marking a shift into a heightened, lyric mode. That manifests in the contrapuntal writing, which literally entwines the voices of the Boy and Agnès – an effect that is otherwise rare in the vocal language of the opera (see Example 2).

[INSERT EXAMPLE 2 AROUND HERE]

The vocal ranges of Boy and Woman also interact and overlap, alternating A and C-sharp, back and forth throughout the passage (bars 357-364). Harmonically, too, the passage is marked out as the most intensely consonant writing in a score akin to certain elements of the harmonic language of Debussy, and of the tonal writing of Berg.<sup>44</sup> The characters mark out a shifting structure of loose tonic-dominant triads, shadowed by open fifths in horns, harp and strings. This begins with the Boy's B-flat in his dominant 7<sup>th</sup> chord on C at bar 354, which is then reconfigured within a G minor triad at 355. This pattern shifts upwards, the final settling point around D and A at bar 357-63, culminating in the ethereal effect of the voices' quiet convergence around A at 361-62, articulating first the major third (A-C-sharp), followed by perfect fifth (D-A), accompanied by harp, string harmonics, and horns, for "dolcissimo" effect. The effect of open fifths set against fifths, a fifth apart, imbues the soundscape in this scene with that "hint of the archaic" Benjamin alludes to as being part of the score. But rather than coding the scene as medieval, as with the glass harmonica or bass viola da gamba, it serves rather to mark the passage out within the score: as a special effect within the opera, and one of intensely lyrical, lush musicality. The ravishing coming-together of the voices quickly opens out onto the scene of Agnès's desire for invention – for a folio of her own. Her commission ensues.

The next scene, Part I, scene vi, in which the Boy returns with Agnès's commissioned folio, resumes the mode of vocal intimacy seen in Part I, scene iv. The scene can be broken into three parts: Agnès awaiting the Boy's arrival (bars 571-600); the Boy's explanation of the folio (miniature two, bars 600-49); and Agnès's re-reading of the folio (bars 650-702). In the broad sense of structure, the pattern of reiteration – Agnès re-reading or re-rendering the folio the Boy has already described – resonates with the conditions of song: as a thing made to be heard again, while the scene as a whole is a reiteration of Agnès's command two scenes earlier. It is at the level of vocal behaviour, though, that the reiterative patterns coalesce and assume a song-like form.

The shift in vocal practice of both Agnès and the Boy occurs in the third scene, where Agnès re-renders the folio the Boy has described in her own voice (see Example 3).

[INSERT EXAMPLE 3 AROUND HERE]

As Agnès names the attributes of the woman depicted, she reiterates her earlier command from Part I, scene iv, and thus participates in her work's transmission. The shape of the melodic lines shifts to match the inventory format of the text. As Agnès effectively repeats herself (sometimes a verbatim quotation of her command from Part I, scene iv), so does the Boy sing her lines back to her: first, as textual repetition (as reflected in the italicization of Crimp's text), but then eventually, too, as melodic repetition. As the characters fall into imitative counterpoint, led by Agnès, the musical processes reinforce the sense that this is not the Boy's voice, nor his creation, but Agnès's, while the intimate, overlapping vocal registers, as in Part I, scene iv, again embody the erotic intimacy of the characters. But the musical gestures here also offer a form and meaning to the "work" created and recreated in these two scenes. The melodic writing espouses a principal of repetition so commonplace that

it might be taken for granted. But it nonetheless stands out within Benjamin's score – a contrast to the often staccato, non-interactive, non-imitative lines the characters sing elsewhere. The vocal writing is moreover intensified by the shimmering presence of the orchestration reserved for parchment scenes – here, a sparse texture of two violins and glass harmonica, all quietened to pianissimo. The magical, memorable effects of this passage present musical lines that are made, or “troubaire,” and also fixed so as to become mobile, and transferable, from one voice to another. Repetitive and repeatable, the impression across these two scenes is not just of a work commissioned and made, but of a song sung, and then sung again.

The principles of melodic repetition witnessed in these examples are not explicitly troubadourian in practice, nor explained as reflective of the originary troubadourian context for the opera. Instead, the intersection of the troubadourian text within the sources and practices of the opera functions as in the palimpsest – yielding to unexpected, unplanned contingency, in which the historical practice inadvertently sheds light on the contemporary musical processes of the opera, and vice versa. It seems as timely as it is untimely to bring another vocal line into counterpoint with that of Agnès and the Boy, a rare trace of inscribed melody for a classic troubadour song. Jaufrè Rudel's *canço*, *Lanquan li jorn* was among the most widely circulated of the troubadour repertory, in the corpus of a troubadour widely emulated by contemporaries and later generation song-makers, Guillem included (see Example 4).

[INSERT EXAMPLE 4 AROUND HERE]

Worlds apart, musically speaking, the troubadour's song nonetheless shares common ground with Agnès's song – both forge their fixity by being “heard again,” that is, by forming

themselves through principles of melodic repetition. Jaufre's song is organized around a standard and classical principle of repetition, and a form of opening reiteration that would become a convention in the early song tradition: a two-phrase (A B) opening call and response, which instantly repeats, A B; while the B phrase serves as the melody's conclusion. An effect, again, so simple as to be taken for granted. Yet, as with Agnès's song-making, it is also one that asserts fixity, melodically speaking, in a vocal environment in constant fear of its loss of memory, loss of voice. In the contingency of their fleeting intersection of purpose – to repeat – these two distinctly different vocal worlds offer one another a mutual support in the enterprise of endurance, and a resistance to erasure.

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The lines of philological inquiry traced in this essay may stimulate new models for engaging with the presence of the past in the operatic medium, as well as contributing to the rich field of medievalism and postmedieval studies. But they also may open up a more local, immediate engagement with the voices of the characters who inhabit Benjamin's and Crimp's rendering of the medieval, and the voice of the songs made by troubadour, Guillem de Cabestaign. It is with these voices that we'll linger, and with some of the implications for the areas of vocal intersection suggested by the dual philology unfolded in this essay, implications that speak both to the "discovered" and to the "made" histories in the opera. Paradoxically, the vocal fragility and anxiety of loss that permeate the poetics of troubadour song result in fierce efforts at vocal endurance and preservation within the opera, on the part of a character who is herself subject to desperately violent acts of reproach and silencing. Abbate and Parker have noted that the treatment of Agnès by her jealous husband at the demonstration of her sexual desire, reiterates an uncomfortable trope within operatic history – the habitual punishment of women who they note are often depicted as "writhing sexual creatures."<sup>45</sup> Exposure of the intersections of Agnès's song-line with that of the troubadour

offers an interesting counterpoint to her undoubted suffering, in the medieval sources as well as in the rendering in *Written on Skin*. While it does not preserve her from the horrifying treatment that befalls her, perhaps it offers some repost to it, in the form of the song-line that she forms through the opera, and which the Boy and Protector are compelled to sustain. As troubadour/trobaritz, Agnès's voice is articulated first through creative self-inventory, and then through reiteration through its inscription on, and revoicing from, parchment. Crucially, it is her voice that the Protector is ultimately forced to ventriloquize, and which changes the way his voice sounds. In the parchment scene of Part III (see Example 1), as discussed earlier, he assumes a vocal timbre out of the ordinary in the context of his regular vocality. At the very point his voice sounds different, he learns that these are the words Agnès has asked to be preserved, and to be read aloud. Agnès's voice is momentarily heard, as a force that shifts the Protector out of his regular vocal habitat. Defying the odds of vocal fallibility, her voice endures, at least for now.

More delicate and elusive is the matter of the vocal lines of the troubadour, Guillem de Cabestaign. In the preceding account, it was Jaufre's melody, not Guillem's, that was brought into conversation with Agnès's lines. Jaufre's songs were among the most emulated of the tradition, and a model for generations of song-makers, Guillem included, for their languishing assertions of love and loss. But while parchment records maintain some kind of vocal presence for the lyrics of Jaufre, they do not for Guillem: as noted earlier in this essay, the sources for his songs are without melody. Some possibilities remain for revoicing Guillem's songs, including recourse to medieval song-writers such as the troubadour Peire Cardenal (1180-1278) and trouvère Gautier de Coinci (1177-1236), who modelled songs after Guillem's, and in the case of Cardenal, contrafacted the versification of *Lo dous cossire*.<sup>46</sup> Yet these sources preserve no certain melodic trace of their troubadour-ancestor. Jaufre is thus at least a sympathetic proxy for a vocal line that has entirely vanished.



While nothing in the early source history of Guillem's songs yields up a vocal trace of the troubadour, its juxtaposition with the postmedieval sources of the opera does, however, invite into dialogue with the historical record a vivid reminder of the original auralty and vocality of Guillem's songs. One effect of the dual philology traced here is to extend the lines of transmission of Guillem's lyrics into a postmedieval environment of overwhelming musical intensity and lyricism. Moreover, it is also an environment utterly attuned to the particularity of the voices that sing individual lines. A distinctive feature of George Benjamin's vocal writing is the exceptional nuance of both melodic shape and timbral inflection, as witnessed, for example, in the short extract of the Protector's agonized act of ventriloquism discussed above, where he moves from hoarse, guttural whisper, to floating falsetto, and through stark changes in melodic pattern. These are lines that were not just conceived for the character but also, crucially, for the singers Benjamin chose for his opera. Although Benjamin is hardly alone in conceiving of his works with specific performers in mind, in interview the composer consistently prioritizes this aspect as a critical part of his compositional practice. The vocal parts of Agnès, the Boy, and the Protector are thus not only voices suited to the historical/postmedieval characters they represent, but also to their voices, as rendered by the original cast of *Written on Skin*: Barbara Hannigan (Agnès), Christopher Purves (Protector), and Bejun Mehta (Boy). Understanding the capabilities and idiosyncracies of these singers thus shapes the melodic writing of *Written on Skin* in countless ways. As Benjamin explains:

I was particularly keen for the vocal line to reflect the characters' intentions at every moment, through their tessitura, rhythmic pacing and intervallic flavour, as I try to serve the drama and find a degree of truth. I've tried to avoid a generic response to the text at all times. Besides, the vocal parts of *Written on Skin* were not composed in the abstract, but specifically for the singers who first performed the roles. I met each singer a long time before starting to compose, and took page after page of notes on the specific qualities of their voices. In molding my lines around their vocal capacities I also found a form of constraint that was profitable for the act of composing.<sup>47</sup>

Benjamin's devotion in learning the "specific qualities" of his singers' voices, and permitting those qualities to shape the music he wrote for them, not only offers insight into how characters in his dramatic works are forged – through the voices that sing them, as well as through the dramatic quality of the words sung, and the stories they tell. His vocal practice also has unexpected possibilities for historians of older vocal traditions. It expands the scope of the notated sources and shines light onto the darker areas just beyond the edges of the parchment record. As in the opera, the complex discourses of identity in the early song traditions of the troubadours seem, too, to play at the boundary between the character of the troubadour (self-fashioned as the lovelorn protagonist of the songs, and refashioned in the manuscript traditions of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries), and the voices that sang those songs. The incarnate, evanescent reality of singing voices, and the anxiety of their loss, resides at the very heart of the tradition. Elusive and unhearable though those older voices may now be, and precarious though they are in the extant sources, their significance for the experience and value of the song tradition is undeniable. While *Written on Skin* cannot bring this audible dimension of the past back to life, its makers, in their deep engagement with the medieval sources, as with their devotion to their singers, create a world – musical and sonorous in nature – which offers rare illumination of the once-vitalizing presence of the troubadour's voice in the invention of song.

## Appendix

### Parchment folios in *Written on Skin*

In addition to the Three Miniatures, scenes devoted to the exegesis of illuminations, parchment folios are commissioned, described, or shown in four further scenes in *Written on Skin*. The folios often provoke a change in orchestration, with use of rare instruments (mandolins, bass viola da gamba, and glass harmonica) reserved exclusively for scenes with parchment. The following appendix summarizes the scenes involving parchment, and includes brief information about characters present, the setting, and details of the orchestration. Complete text for the scenes may be found in the 2012 edition of Crimp's *Text for Music*.

### **1. Protector's commission and viewing of the First Miniature: A Work of Mercy**

#### Scene, characters and summary of action

Part I, scene ii                      The Protector, The Boy and Agnès

Set in the home of the Protector, the scene begins with the Protector's commission of an illuminated manuscript, issued with the instruction "Make me a book. Fill it with illumination," and then a demonstration of the Boy's work with a review of an illuminated folio, the *First Miniature: A Work of Mercy*.

#### Orchestration

Two mandolins to accompany the Boy's presentation of the First Miniature.

### **2. The Boy's writing-room, parchment viewing, and Agnès's first commission**

#### Scene, characters and summary of action

Part I, scene iv                      Agnès and the Boy

Agnès goes to the Boy's writing-room at night and asks him to show her how a book is made or "invented." They review a folio together, one containing the image of a woman; Agnès draws so close to the parchment that she blocks out the light by which the Boy works. Agnès then commissions the Boy to make her a leaf and to "invent another woman," she outlines the woman it is to depict – a self-portrait.

### **3. Presentation of Agnès's commission: Second Miniature: A House in Winter**

#### Scene, characters and summary of action

Part I, scene vi                      Agnès and the Boy

Agnès is alone at night in her room. The Boy arrives with the folio she commissioned in Part I scene iv. He then describes it to her as the Second Miniature: A House in Winter. The illumination is of a house in winter, its roof "like a jewel-box lid" lifted off to reveal a woman tossing and turning in her bed. He asks Agnès to review it and to tell him "whether it's real." Agnès then describes the woman, who resembles herself, prompted by questions from the Boy. The scene ends with Agnès giving herself to the Boy, declaring "A picture – says Agnès – is nothing. Love's not a picture: love is an act."

#### Orchestration

A bass viola da gamba accompanies Agnès while she awaits the Boy, and continues with the Boy's arrival and subsequent explanation of the Miniature to Agnès; the bass viola da gamba is joined by a glass harmonica for Agnès's review of the folio.

### **4. Agnès's recommissioned page**

#### Scene, characters and summary of action

Part II, scene x                      Agnès and the Boy

Agnès comes to the Boy's writing-room at night, riven with jealousy because she thinks the Boy is having an affair with her sister, Marie. She confronts the Boy, who explains he lied to the Protector to protect her. Agnès then commissions the Boy to "make me a new page," one that will reveal their love to the Protector and "blind him ... make him cry blood." This will be the "secret page" revealed in Part III, scene xi.

### **5. Presentation of the Protector's Commissioned Book**

#### Scene, characters and summary of action

Part III, scene xi      The Protector, Agnès and the Boy

The Boy lays out folios from the book commissioned in Part I, scene ii, and explains the images to the Protector and to Agnès. They include grotesque premonitions of the future, one filled with shopping malls, airports, as well as violent war and destruction; and scenes of the Protector's estate, his "Paradise." The scene concludes with the presentation of the "secret page," a folio of writing, not an illumination, which is the page commissioned by Agnès in Part II, scene x.

#### Orchestration

Two mandolins play throughout the scene.

### **6. Protector reads the Secret Page to Agnès**

#### Scene, characters and summary of action

Part Three: XII The Protector and Agnès

The Protector reads the "secret page" left by the Boy, whose text contains the citation from Guillem de Cabestaign's *canso*.

### **7. Agnès's suicide is described by an Angel, and forms the Third miniature: The Woman Falling**

#### Scene, characters and description

Part III, scene xv      Angel I

An Angel (sung by the same singer who plays the Boy) witnesses Agnès's suicide jump from a balcony, pursued by the Protector and watched by three angels. The scene is described as if it were a manuscript illumination, and constitutes the Third Miniature: The Woman Falling.

#### Orchestration

Bass viola da gamba and glass harmonica

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<sup>1</sup> George Benjamin's programme note is reproduced in the 2004 score, George Benjamin, *Palimpsests for Orchestra* (London: Faber Music, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Crimp's text for music is published separately, see Martin Crimp, *Written on Skin: Opera in Three Parts – Text for Music* (London: Faber Music, 2012). Citations of the text are from this edition. For the orchestral score, see George Benjamin, *Written on Skin: Opera in Three*

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*Parts with Text* by Martin Crimp: *Full Score* (London: Faber Music, 2013); a vocal score with piano reduction is also available from Faber Music, 2013. Musical examples in this essay are from the vocal score.

<sup>3</sup> As is the case with many troubadours, scant documentary evidence remains to shed light on the identity of Guillem de Cabestaign outside that of his songs and prose biographies, although more survives for Guillem than for others in the tradition. For a summary of the archival evidence attesting to him, see Michel Adroher, *Les Troubadours roussillonnais* (Perpignan: Publications de l'Olivier, 2012), 77-91, esp. 83-88, which in turn draws on Montserrat Cots, "Notas históricas sobre el trovador Guillem de Cabestany," *Boletín de la Real Academia de Buenas Letras de Barcelona* 37 (1977-78): 23-65. Spelling of Occitan names follows that of the *razos*, as adopted by editors Bill Burgwinkle and Margarita Egan.

<sup>4</sup> References to the Occitan texts and to translations of the *vidas* and *razos* of Guillem de Cabestaign and other troubadours are from the following editions: *Biographies des troubadours: textes provençaux des XIIIe et XIVe siècles*, ed. Jean Boutière and A.-H. Schutz (Paris: Marcel Didier, 1950), *The Vidas of the Troubadours*, transl. Margarita Egan (New York and London: Garland, 1984) for translations of the *vidas*, and *Razos and Troubadour Songs*, transl. William Burgwinkle (London and New York: Garland, 1990) for translations of the *razos* and related *cansos*. Troubadour lyrics are referenced throughout according to the system of numbering in Alfred Pillet and Henry Carsten, *Bibliographie der Troubadours* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1933) [hereafter *PC*]. Guillem de Cabestaign's works are quoted from Arthur Långfors's edition of the lyrics in *Les Chansons de Guilhem de Cabestanh*, *Les Classiques français du moyen âge*, 42 (Paris: Champion, 1924). The texts of Långfors's edition are also reproduced with modern French translation in Adroher, *Troubadours*.

<sup>5</sup> For further background on Guillem de Cabestaign's inaugural place in the *coeur mangé* tradition, see Adroher, *Troubadours*, 82-83.

<sup>6</sup> "The Angels of History," Martin Crimp interviewed by Alain Perroux (30 April, 2012), and "The Intensity of the Moment," George Benjamin interviewed by Alain Perroux (10 March, 2012). The interviews are translated from French by Kenneth Chalmers, and reproduced in the programme for the 2013 and 2017 production of *Written on Skin* at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden at 18-23 and 33-39.

<sup>7</sup> Maria Ryan, "Angels in the Archive: Animating the Past in *Written on Skin*," in *Recomposing the Past: Early Music on Stage and Screen* (Routledge, forthcoming 2018), and Elisabeth Angel-Perez, "Martin Crimp's Nomadic Voices," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 24 (2014): 353-362. I am very grateful to Maria Ryan for generously sharing her essay with me prior to publication, and for her very helpful suggestions for the present study.

<sup>8</sup> Crimp cites Walter Benjamin's 1940 essay *On the Concept of History*, inspired by Paul Klee's painting of the *Angelus Novus*, as an influence on his construction of dual temporalities in the opera. See his "Angels," 18. Maria Ryan's forthcoming essay looks in closer detail at these links to (Walter) Benjamin's essay, and the implications for the opera's representation of history.

<sup>9</sup> Released on the Opus Arte label: OA 1125D. The version recorded for the DVD was produced by Margaret Williams.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Erica Jeal's review of the 2013 London premiere at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in the *Guardian*, 10 March, 2013: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/mar/10/written-on-skin-review>; and a review by Alex Ross in *The New Yorker*, 25 March, 2013, reposted on his blog, *The Rest is Noise*: <http://www therestisnoise.com/2013/03/george-benjamins-written-on-skin.html>, both accessed 8 September, 2017. Quoting here from Jeal's review.

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<sup>11</sup> Liam Cagney's review in the *Telegraph*, 16 July, 2012: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/opera/9403789/Written-on-Skin-Festival-Aix-review.html>, accessed September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017. James Sohre's review of the Amsterdam premier in *Opera Today*, 27 October, 2012, elaborates further, noting that while "there are many influences evident in the musical result ... Benjamin has found his own style, and his own palette of effects, one that is meant to please the ear, and not just the intellect, as in many another contemporary opera." See [http://www.operatoday.com/content/2012/10/amsterdams\\_skin.php](http://www.operatoday.com/content/2012/10/amsterdams_skin.php), accessed 8<sup>th</sup> September, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera: The Last Four Hundred Years*, (London: Penguin, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2015), chapter 20, "Revenants in the Museum." See especially 538-44 for discussion of *Written on Skin*.

<sup>13</sup> Abbate and Parker, *History of Opera*, 544.

<sup>14</sup> The opera was announced by the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden in January, 2017, and will premiere at the opera house in May, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> There is a good deal of work in this area. Some exemplary cases include Simon Goldhill, *Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity: Art, Opera, Fiction, and the Proclamation of Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), especially chapters three and four, which treat Gluck and Wagner respectively. Arthur Groos, writing from the perspective of musicology and medieval studies, has explored the medieval context for Wagner's texts, see in particular his "Appropriation in Wagner's *Tristan* Libretto," in Arthur Groos and Roger Parker (eds.), *Reading Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 12-33, and touched on in his "Between Memory and Desire: Wagner's Libretto and Late Romantic Subjectivity," in Arthur Groos (ed.), *Richard Wagner: Tristan und Isolde*, Cambridge Opera Handbook (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 38-39; see too Volker Mertens, "Wagner's Middle Ages," transl. Stewart Spencer, in Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski (eds.), *Wagner Handbook* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 236-68. For an excellent example of a study placing music, opera included, in dialogue with medieval and medievalism studies, see Heather Wiebe, *Britten's Unquiet Pasts: Sound and Memory in Postwar Reconstruction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), and in particular chapter five, "Remembering Faith in Noye's *Fludde*," 151-90.

<sup>16</sup> For an excellent example of the range of approaches embraced by medievalism studies, see Louise D'Arcens (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). See in particular D'Arcens's introduction for an overview of recent trends in medievalism studies, and see, too, Stephanie Trigg's contribution, "Medievalism and Theories of Temporality," 196-209, which includes a valuable account of the field of postmedieval studies, see 200-202. A major forum for the field of postmedievalism is in the journal *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies*, edited by Myra Seaman and Eileen Joy; founded in 2010, its rationale explains its goal as being "to bring the medieval and modern into productive critical relation."

<sup>17</sup> Anne Stone's forthcoming article 'The Postmodern Troubadour,' in Stephen C. Meyer and Kristen Yri (eds.), *Handbook to Music and Medievalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming, 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> D'Arcens, "Introduction," 2.

<sup>20</sup> In addition to works of Dinshaw and Trigg cited above, see Trigg's *Shame and Honor: A Vulgar History of the Order of the Garter* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

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<sup>21</sup> George Benjamin, *Dream of the Song: For Countertenor, Female Chorus and Orchestra* (2014-15) (London: Faber Music, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin, *Palimpsests*, programme note.

<sup>23</sup> There are also fruitful, if coincidental, resonances to Gérard Genette's celebrated usage of the palimpsest in his 1982 critique, *Literature in the Second Degree*, which explores the chorus of prior texts summoned in any literary context. See his *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, transl. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin, "Intensity," 34.

<sup>25</sup> Crimp, "Angels," 18.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>27</sup> Benjamin, "Intensity," 33.

<sup>28</sup> Abbate and Parker, *History*, p. 538. *L'Amour de loin* is one of three operas discussed in their assessment of contemporary opera trends, including Adès's *The Tempest* (2003), which also deploys the song-within-song trope, and *Written on Skin*, which they note does not. See chapter 20, esp. 538-44.

<sup>29</sup> Abbate and Parker, *History*, 540.

<sup>30</sup> Portions of his *Lanquan li jorn son lonc en mai* (PC 262: 2) and *Quan lo rossinhols el foillos* (PC 262: 6) are sung, and reported as sung, alternating the original Occitan with French translation. Jaufrè's songs are edited in Jaufrè Rudel, *Il Canzoniere di Jaufrè Rudel: edizione critica, con introduzione, note e glossario*, ed. Giorgio Chiarini (L'Aquila: Japadre, 1985). For an edition of the opera in piano reduction, including Maalouf's French libretto with English translation, see Kaija Saariaho, *L'Amour de loin*, libretto by Amin Maalouf and piano reduction by Christopher Brown (London: Chester Music, 2010).

<sup>31</sup> For an excellent account of the role of memory in medieval culture of writing, see Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 10 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). On the relationship of memory and authority, and on the conceptualization of composition as linked to invention, see especially chapter six, "Memory and Authority." Quoting here from 194.

<sup>32</sup> Crimp, "Angels," 22.

<sup>33</sup> For example in a review by Stephen Graham of the 2013 Covent Garden production for the online review, *Music Criticism*: see <http://www.musicalcriticism.com/opera/roh-skin-0313.shtml>, accessed 25 March, 2017. Abbate and Parker contextualize *Written on Skin*'s effects within a larger trend of operatic "revenge" in the twenty-first century in their *History of Opera*, chapter 20.

<sup>34</sup> Crimp, "Angels," 22.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>36</sup> Pierre Rigaudière, "Guide d'écoute," *George Benjamin: Written on Skin*, L'Avant-scène opera 276 (Paris: Editions premières loges, 2013), 57-58. Noting the reference to Guillem's *canso* here, Rigaudière argues that the citation is animated by evocation of heptatonic modalities of certain ragas.

<sup>37</sup> Two excellent overviews of the tradition remain Frank Akehurst and Judith Davis (eds.), *A Handbook of the Troubadours* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) and Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay (eds.), *The Troubadours: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). On the formulaic aspect of the lyrics, see essays on "Language," "Rhetoric," and "Topoi," in Akehurst and Davies (eds.), *Handbook*.

<sup>38</sup> Two of these may be misattributed to Guillem, on which see Långfors's edition, 24-30, and his introductory discussion at iv-v.

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<sup>39</sup> The version appears in manuscript C, folios 213v-14. Full details for sources for the song are given in Långfors's edition and in *PC*.

<sup>40</sup> The extensive variants for all of Guillem's songs are recorded in Långfors's edition and in *PC*. For further details, see Rubric, Section 1.

<sup>41</sup> For a useful introduction to the *chansonniers*, see Bill Burgwinkle, "The *Chansonniers* as Books," in Gaunt and Kay (eds.), *Troubadours*, 246-62.

<sup>42</sup> See especially Elizabeth Poe, *From Poetry to Prose in Old Provençal: The Emergence of the *Vidas*, the *Razos*, and the *Razos de Trobar** (Birmingham, Ala: Summa Publications, 1984), Olivia Holmes, *Assembling the Lyric Self: Authorship from Troubadour Song to Italian Poetry Book* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) and Marisa Galvez, *Songbook: How Lyrics Became Poetry in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012), and Burgwinkle, "Chansonniers."

<sup>43</sup> Burgwinkle, *Razos*, xvii-xviii.

<sup>44</sup> A number of reviews and commentaries liken the score to the style of *Wozzeck*. Abbate and Parker elaborate on that connection in their *History*, see 542-43.

<sup>45</sup> Abbate and Parker, *History*, 543.

<sup>46</sup> Details of these and other cases are provided in Adroher, *Troubadours*, 80-82. For further details of Peire Cardenal's *contrafactum* of *Lo dous cossire* in his *canço Cals aventura*, see *Poésies complètes du troubadour Peire Cardenal (1180-1278)*, ed. René Levaud, Bibliothèque Méridionale 34 (Toulouse: Edouard Privat, 1957: 436-42. Gautier de Coinci's modelling of Guillem is discussed in J. H. Marshall, "Gautier de Coinci, imitateur de G. de Cabestany," *Romania* 98 (1977): 245-49.

<sup>47</sup> Benjamin, "Intensity," 38.